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AUTHOR Sandlin, Betty; Sutherland, Mary S.
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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are given in this paper for developing a physical fitness program for senior citizens. Discussed in detail are surveying community interest, program planning and implementation, and program evaluation. It is pointed out that fitness programs can modify many of the physical and mental changes of aging. It is emphasized that the program should be regularly evaluated to assess participant interest, satisfaction, physiological changes, and overall program successes. (JD)

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SENIOR CITIZENS CAN BE PHYSICALLY FIT: HINTS FOR A SUCCESSFULLY DEVELOPED PROGRAM

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Betty Sandlin, R.N., MS
Director, Womens Resource Center
Gulf Coast Community Hospital
Panama City, FL 32401

Mary Sutherland, Ed.D., MPH
Associate Professor
Human Services/Studies
Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL 32306

SP 030 306

SENIOR CITIZENS CAN BE PHYSICALLY FIT: HINTS FOR A SUCCESSFULLY DEVELOPED PROGRAM

Life expectancy for the American population has increased dramatically since 1900. Today, males can expect to live fifteen years longer as compared to their counterparts in the 1900's and women can expect to live as many as twenty years longer (Health Notes, 1985). There are few long term studies documenting the relationship between physical exercise and life expectancy, but the results of data analysis from several different studies found that positive health and fitness practices can lead to increased life expectancy (Health Notes, 1985). Also, little can be done to change the aging processes, but many of the physical and mental aging related changes can be modified as a result of regular physical exercise (Frankel and Byrd, 1980). For example:

---Exercise can help prevent heart attacks by enlarging the coronary arteries. Without exercise, the heart muscle becomes weak and flabby, and less responsive to stresses (Cooper, 1977).

---Osteoporosis, a common bone deterioration disorder among the elderly population, especially women, can be halted. Exercise actually stimulates the formation of new bone (Notelwitz and Ware, 1982).

---As a result of a regular exercise program, individuals may experience higher energy levels for extended time periods, as well as more effective and improved quality of sleep (Cooper, 1977).

---Exercise can enhance self-image and self-esteem. Also, exercise can relieve stress, as well as condition the body to deal more effectively with environmental stresses. According to White, "It is fascinating to know that one can grow healthier as one grows older and not necessarily

the reverse!"(Cooper, 1977).

---Exercise can improved digestion, especially for the relief of constipation (Frankel and Richards, 1980).

---Exercise in conjunction with diet is a realistic way to control weight. As an individual grows older, the bodies metabolism rate decreases, resulting in a weight gain for some individuals (Cooper, 1977).

Therefore, physical fitness program for the elderly should focus on the reduction of chronic health conditions or the natural "slowing down" of the aging processes (Frankel and Richards, 1980).

Surveying Community Interest

The target population should be identified using selected socio-demographic characteristics in order to determine interest in a potential senior citizens physical fitness program. Examples of these socio-demographic characteristics might include age groups, economic levels, minorities, medical and health system usage or educational level. Information such as this, can be obtained from the local Area Agency on Aging, Census Track data, or surveying the medical and health related communities.

Awareness campaigns may be used to market the senior citizens program to specific target populations. These campaigns generally utilize selected intervention strategies such as:

---Media Advertisements. Media announcements as newspapers ads, brochures, radio and TV commercials, and announcements of public speaking engagements are valuable instruments in creating awareness among potentially interested populations.

---Civic and Community Organizations. The elderly population generally participates in various civic and community organizations. Many larger churches encourage specific senior citizens programs. Additionally, the American Association of Retired Persons actively supports health promotion programs, some of which are conducted in cooperation with the American National Red Cross.

---Volunteers. Volunteers can be of assistance in several different phases of a physical fitness program. Retirees who volunteer their services may offer expertise based upon their prior experiences, in such areas as community analysis instrument design, instrument construction, survey administration or analyzing the data.

---Mailing Lists. Some organizations may have mailing lists that can be purchased. These mailing lists could identify potential program clientele according to name, address, age, sex, and special interests.

Once the potential target population has responded to the awareness campaign, program base line data should be obtained e.g., participant name and address or fitness interest activities from a checklist which includes such interventions as low impact physical exercise, walking groups, health enhancement activities, and selected social activities. The collected base line data should be analyzed and later used for planning the physical fitness program. Areas of highest target population interest, as well as lesser interest areas should be emphasized.

An "Open House" featuring the developed senior citizens physical fitness program should be held in order to attract specific program participants. Individuals attending the Open House should be informally questioned as

a part of the continuing program interest assessment. The newly gathered data could reinforce the previously data, or provide additional programmatic directions.

Finally, one of the most important principles in establishing a successful physical fitness program is to attract a receptive population that recognize that they are a part of "the continuous program planning process." The participants need to feel that their "important" ideas and needs are being continuously incorporated into the overall program plan. Resulting will be happy, faithful and successful program supporters.

Program Planning and Implementation

There are three important considerations necessary in order to plan effective, successful senior citizens physical fitness programs. These considerations include: (1) What the program will consist of, (2) When the program will be offered and, (3) Where will the program be held. Most importantly, all potential program participants should have their personal physicians permission to participate in the physical fitness program.

What The Program Will Consist Of?

The major program interest areas should be based upon the results of the analysis of the survey data. Examples of potential program interest areas might include:

---Aerobic exercises can be fun even for the elderly. As a result of a three times weekly aerobics program, participants may indicate significant changes in oxygen utilization, percentage of body fat, physical work capacity, pulmonary ventilation, and systolic and diastolic blood pressure readings (Cooper, 1977).

---Psychomotor reaction time in the elderly is generally faster for the physical fit senior citizen as compared to sedentary older persons (Frankel and Richards, 1980).

---Walking is usually a preferred activity for the elderly. As a program activity, walking is inexpensive, easily coordinated, adaptable, and places minimal stress on the individual.

---Low impact exercises such as Yoga may be a favorite exercise method of seniors. Yoga is a non-invasive discipline emphasizing deep breathing and stretching exercises.

When The Program Should Be Offered

The precise time and day of the week the program should be offered must be evaluated on a local basis. The physical fitness program should not conflict with long-standing organizational meetings such as the American Association of Retired Persons, the Council on Aging, major Church events, or many other group activities. Additionally, program hours should be fairly flexible. For example, a physical fitness program should not be planned for the evening hours since many seniors can not safely travel after dark.

Where The Program Will Be Held

The senior citizens physical fitness program could be held in a wellness center, a physical fitness center or an unoccupied club house. Additionally, many established physical fitness focused centers welcome a new well planned program, since it is much easier to incorporate a new program into an existing agency, than develop a new specific organization to operate the senior citizens physical fitness program.

Evaluating the Program

A planned sequence of measurement and evaluations activities should be designed to determine program successes during all phases of the program. For example, gathered baseline data can serve as the basis for determining changes in the senior citizens physical fitness program phases and if the program objectives were achieved. Noted too, might be the number of participants served, the proportion of participants served over a specified time period, and the extent to which desirable behavioral changes were produced. Examples of various evaluation and measurement techniques utilized at various program stages might include:

---A phone survey of selected community agencies in order to determine knowledge about the program for program referral.

---Requesting the potential target population to write or call for additional information after viewing a public service service announcement, can assist in estimating target population demographic characteristics or potential participant interest level.

---Individual program sessions should be evaluated to provide instant participant feedback need to effectively plan future program activities or topics.

---The initial senior citizen senior attitudes, expectations, and knowledges survey may serve as a fixed point for measuring change. Measured for example could be changes in self held health perceptions, personal health interests, lifestyle patterns or health values as related to public policy.

---Personal participant records should be maintained. Information as to participants name, age, address, fitness profile, personal health

history, program prescription and physicians referral form are needed. These records are needed to accurately record and reassess physiological changes at specified intervals.

Finally, the results of a planned evaluation program can validate program successes.

Conclusions

A well planned senior citizens physical fitness program can be successfully implemented within most communities. Quality, senior citizen focused cardiovascular fitness programs can be developed at minimal program participant costs. Most importantly, the developed physical fitness program should be regularly evaluated to assess program participant interest, satisfaction, physiological changes, and overall program successes. Senior citizens can and must be physically active and functionally independent during their "Golden Years" in order to enjoy life to their upmost.

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